



S2:E2 We Are Dallas Arts

Lily Cabatu Weiss in conversation with Stephanie Fortunato

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Stephanie Fortunato: Hello, and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

I'm Stephanie Fortunato from Providence, Rhode Island. Land stewarded first by the Narragansett, the people of the little point or people of the points and bays and the Wampanoag, the people of first light and the people of the east. I acknowledge the traditional owners and first nations people across all the lands and countries who are joining us today and pay our respects to elders past, present, and emerging. First nations people are our original storytellers, artists, and custodians of culture.

Today, I am so excited to be speaking with Lily Cabatu Weiss, Executive Director for the Dallas Arts District in Texas. Lily is an arts leader and educator with a background in dance who in recent years has led a movement to support, not just the artists and organisations in the districts, but really to bring a whole community together, to return to in-person cultural performances and the opportunity to be together.

After the conversation with Lily, I will be joined by the brilliant Criena Gehrke from The Three Bells production team for our key takeaways segments so we can talk about some actionable insights from today's conversation.

Hello, Lily! Welcome.

[00:01:47]

Lily Cabatu Weiss: Good morning, Stephanie, I'm so excited to have this conversation with you today.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Ah, me too. I've been such a fan of the work that you are doing at the Dallas' arts district for some time now, but I'd love to get started with just your journey. Can you tell me a little bit about how you went from being an active member of the dance community as a dancer and choreographer to educator, to arts administrator?



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: I'll try to do that quickly, cause I've had a long, uh, standing career in the city of Dallas. And I am definitely in love with the arts and cultural landscape in the city of Dallas. Uh, how it started is basically I am the youngest of five girls and my father was in the army. So I'm an army brat and we travelled, but being the youngest, his last station was Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. And interestingly enough, while I took music lessons privately, I did not realise that El Paso Independent School District is one of the few schools at that particular time districts in Texas that offered dance, and well, it made a difference in, uh, what I chose to do. And I knew that the arts were a passion of mine. And part of that is because my parents, particularly my mother, taught us all the Filipino dances and the traditional music exposed us to all of that. And I am so grateful, as we pass that legacy on to our own children. And I say that my sisters and I do. So basically I went to Texas Woman's University because my mentor in El Paso made the phone call and got me a scholarship at Texas Woman's University. And did my undergraduate there.

Interestingly enough, as I was auditioning and I did get an offer right at the end of school, but I had an injury, an ankle injury that I thought was just a sprain. Uh, it turned out to be a fracture that I ended up having surgery on. So in that period of time that I needed to recover, I was fortunate to get a job at Houston, in Houston, and I stayed there for three years, learned tons and was embedded in the dance community and the arts community in Houston. At that time um, my husband finished graduate school and I told him the only other place – if we were staying in Texas that I would let him go and try to find a job, is Dallas, or we stay in Houston because Dallas had five years later opened up at that particular time called Arts Magnet high school.

It is now called Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. And in that time period, I was what I call a pickup dancer. So a freelance dancer in the evenings and taught during the day and had rehearsals at Booker T. I always knew I was going to teach. That was never an option one or an option two, perform or teach. And it ended up being, perform and teach. (laughs) So, uh, I was at Booker T., I was in Houston for three years. As an educator, I was at Booker T., a head of the dance department at Booker T. and ended up there in the dance department for 36 years. After that, I decided I'd retire so I could listen to other things that I might want to do. And in that listening stage, the school asked me if I would be interested in coming back and proving to the school district that we needed an artistic director back. And it was founded by Paul Baker. He was the original founder and artistic director of the school. And I was the one that screamed the loudest that we needed an artistic director to push the arts further than we could ever imagine ourselves going. So the school asked me, our principal asked me, if I would be interested in coming back part-time so that the district would understand the need for an artistic director.

So I said yes, cause part-time like, it's still listen to what was going on. It was very successful that year, and the school district ended up paying for the new position of artistic director. They asked me if I would be interested in doing that. I said for a limited amount of time. So, I became artistic director, the second artistic director that the school had. And in January of that second year, a few members of the board of the Dallas Arts District, they had already been on a search for an executive director. And so when they called me in January and said, w-would you probably are going to tell us no, cause you've been at the school so long, but we want you to listen to why we would like you to put your name in the hat. So there was a little bit of a pause and I said, obviously I'll need to think about this, but the good news is, my gut is not telling me no.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: And I said, that's always a really good thing because I can usually listen to my heart, pretty immediately. And since I didn't immediately say no, and I really thought about it, I knew that this was the type of challenge I needed. I knew that I believe in the Dallas Arts District, that I believe in arts and culture in the city of Dallas. But this way, I could actually take the job and take my skills and put it to a different use. So, that's six years ago. That's what I did. And uh, shifted to non-profit. (laughs)

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, I love that whole hearted yes that you felt, you know, that calling that was there. (laughs)

Lily Cabatu Weiss: Yes.

Stephanie Fortunato: But you're the director of the Dallas Arts District. So I'm thinking when this was established, there was an idea that arts and culture were important for some reason. Can you tell me a little bit about the history of the Dallas Arts District?

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Ah, yes. Certainly in the late seventies, our local government hired a task force and a consultant to come in and really study if it was an economic plus to bring the major arts and cultural organisations into one neighbourhood, and basically there weren't residents in downtown Dallas at that particular time. It was all business and it was employment.

You commuted to downtown Dallas and you left as fast as you could. One of the aspects of building and supporting this Dallas Arts District was to bring life in the evenings and on the weekends to downtown, and to bring people, our neighbours, our residents, visitors, into downtown Dallas.

So that's how that began. And in 1983, an ordinance was passed with boundaries to set up this Northeast corner of downtown Dallas as the Dallas Arts District. And in 1984, the Dallas Museum of Art was the first institution to move in. And the second one was the Meyerson Symphony Center where the Dallas Symphony Orchestra is housed. And that was in 1989. Interestingly enough, this wasn't intentional. It's a mixed-use neighbourhood, so the forecast was that corporate and cultural, were all going to take their turns and develop in our neighbourhood. The majority of the cultural organisations moved in first, with the exception of Trammell Crow Center who built that high rise and they just did a multi-million dollar renovation. They built that in 1985. So they were the first ones and really the only ones for quite a while. And we have three historic churches in our neighbourhood. And of course we have the historic building, which is Booker T. Washington High School where the performing and visual arts high school exists.

So we have that historic building and then where Dallas Black Dance Theatre home is, that was the YMCA and that's a historic building. So it truly is mixed-use, now with corporate, with residents, with our cultural organisations, our historic churches and school, and of course, Dallas Black Dance Theatre. And then we have the first deck park that was built over a freeway, um, it was a game changer. It's going to be 10 years old in October and that's Klyde Warren Park. And then the Perot Museum of Nature and Science 10 years ago also built, in downtown.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: So we've got all the major arts organisations, plus, the city was so committed to this idea, they built what we call now, Moody Performance Hall, and that is the city performance hall. It houses many of the cultural organisations in the city of Dallas. So you don't have to be obviously a resident company in the arts district. You don't have to live and work in the arts district. You can rent that theatre at three different tiers. And those three tiers are based on the non-profit organisations budget. So I love that theatre and I love what it stands for. And it's right across the street from Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. So we've got these amazing, talented future artists and leaders in the community in our arts district that brings this energy like no other. Then we have a city performance hall where we've got so many of our arts organisations bringing in transformational programming. Uh, so it's exciting.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I love this. I love the way the uh that, those come together to create that vibrant cultural life. But tell me a little bit about the programming that happens in the Dallas Arts District and some of the ways in which you take advantage of having all of those institutions and people in such close proximity.

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Obviously we don't need to compete with our exemplary arts organisations for presenting arts.

What we do need to do, is make sure that we support activity and vibrant activity that activates and vitalises the public realm, our arts district. So either pedestrians could happen on a pop-up programming or they can actually come to one of our signature series, which is called our block parties. Now during the pandemic, uh, we had to curtail that. But what I usually do is do one block party on the east side of the arts district and close the streets on that side.

And then the other block party, which is our Pride block party in June, we collaborate with the three museums; the Dallas Museum of Art, the Nasher Sculpture Center and the Crow Museum of Asian Art. So basically when the public comes to attend that particular block party, not only are they getting arts programming in the street by a stage that's put up in the street and activity and benders and artisans and makers as part of the block party.

But they're also getting specific programming that's happening in all three art museums. So they flow from one place to another. And that's quite wonderful. And our block parties bring anywhere from at the time, pre-pandemic, 20 to 35,000 people.

Uh, and at that particular time, it was a six-hour block party from six until midnight. We're going to reimagine that to a shorter block party. We are going back to the block parties this April.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Ah, I'm sure everyone is looking forward to that so much. (laughs)



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: It's exciting and what we do know, and as you know, that people want to get back to in-person experiences. And I can't tell you how many people actually will come back to outdoor experiences.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: It's so important. And I think this is a great segue actually, to take a step back to that moment in March 2020, when the lockdowns were happening, and to the evolution of the Dallas Arts District from focusing in, on, on your area of the city uh, to really becoming an, a civic, cultural leader in the movement to bring people back together.

Can you talk a little bit about, you know, how you guys started to organise during the pandemic and what the long-term effects have been of bringing together the coalition of arts and cultural and civic leaders in response to the pandemic?

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Thank you, Stephanie. That is one of those moments in time, obviously, that was unplanned and none of us knew or expected that any of our arts venues would close down at the same time. However, we did expect it when we heard that Broadway closed down.

And so when Broadway closed down, we did know that this is not something that Dallas was going to avoid, or anyone was going to avoid. So when the shutdown happened on March the 13th here in Dallas, that was the busiest weekend set for the spring season. Every theatre was open, every museum had beautiful exhibits. There was the first movie in the park, you know, movies in the park were starting and I thought this is perfect. And then it wasn't. And so that was March 13th.

Stephanie Fortunato: All the plans.

Lily Cabatu Weiss: I know, exactly. And interestingly enough, at the end of March, our director at the Dallas Museum of Art called some of us and said, let's get on a conference call.

And it was just arts district people. We got on the phone, everyone's just talking about how long do you expect that this is going to go, all of us estimated at that particular time, maybe May. (laughs) You know here we are.

Stephanie Fortunato: Mm-hmm, like every two weeks right?

Lily Cabatu Weiss: March, April, May. Right, exactly. And so, um, we started talking about what's happening, what are you- what's happening with your staff? What are all your decision-makings and comparing notes. Cause everyone needed to know what other leaders were doing in their own arts community.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: And that quickly, we met the following week, the same, just on a phone call, decided at that particular time that we needed a more formal meeting. And so that's when the Dallas Arts District took that meeting over, of what we call, I call it the expanded CEOs. Cause what we decided was this wasn't an arts district problem. This was a city-wide sharing that we really needed to get best practices, and ideas and challenges from several of the leaders in our city.

So we, we expanded it to the other two museums in downtown. We also expanded it to Fair Park, um, Dallas Summer Musicals. We have Bishop Arts Theatre in an area of Dallas in the Oak Cliff area of Dallas. We had Sammons Center for the Arts, which represents all of the smaller organisations. Uh, a lot of the smaller organisations in town and anyone who actually, we reached out to or others suggested, we would continue to reach out. Or they would hear that we were meeting and reach out to me and I would send them an invitation to uh, Friday's meeting. And this will surprise you and it surprised me. So here we are, beginning of April, we start meeting every Friday at 11:00 AM. And obviously these are the CEOs and artistic directors of all these companies. And did we have perfect attendance? Absolutely not. Did we have good attendance? Yes.

And we met every Friday, Stephanie, at 11:00 AM from April, 2020 through June, 2021, every Friday.

Stephanie Fortunato: Fifteen months!

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: That's correct. Every Friday. And I would say, every eight weeks. I would say, does this group want to go to every other week? Absolutely not, Lily. We need to meet every week. Even if I can't meet, I need to find out what happened in that meeting. Okay, then we'll keep moving on. And in June, the group finally said, okay, now we'll meet every two weeks. When we started the new year in 2022, I, and of course we were with Omicron and the surges and the numbers, the increased numbers in Dallas county, we met at the first meeting and I said, you know, we need to discuss, obviously we can do meetings like this when we know we need to meet, or do you want to keep the every two weeks?

And everyone unitedly said, we have to keep this meeting going. Even if it's short, even if it's just one aspect or issue. And it was really important to us as leaders, and what I will say as collaborators, it has made our community stronger than ever. We know we have choices and we know that in crisis, you can either open your doors and work together, or you can close your doors and protect, and move into silos. And Dallas has done that before. I'm not saying that we're, you know, champions of this new idea, but what we knew is that we had to work together in order for all of us to survive. And it was important for arts and culture in Dallas, not just individuals, but arts and culture in the city of Dallas to survive. And it would help with our economic recovery as the city is recovering from the pandemic. So it was important and we're still meeting every other Friday.

And in those meetings, Stephanie, they ran the gamut. Early on, first thing we did is find three different vendors who would give major discounts to equipment, to masks, to sanitise.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: You know, all of the equipment that everyone now had to shift to making sure that their staff had. So we searched vendors that would give Dallas arts was the code at that would give a major discount to purchasing those.

We worked together to do a reopening COVID guidelines that 61 arts organisations in our community signed onto. That those would be the minimum guidelines whenever any of our institutions were going to reopen. We decided, because I was getting bombarded and so were each of the arts organisations by the press saying, tell me how much revenue is being lost. Tell me how many jobs are being lost. So what three organisations; The Arts Community Alliance, which we call TACA, Dallas Arts District and Sammons Center for the Arts, we joined together and did a survey, three different surveys. One that went from March until May of 2020, one that went from March to July of 2020. And one that went from March until November 30th. And by the time we did the third survey, 92 arts organisations had participated in that survey.

Over \$95 million in revenue was lost, over a thousand jobs were lost and that hit the front page of Dallas morning news. It was timely in that this local government was making some decisions on how some of their recovery money, who's that recovery money might go to. And several of our city council members work together to creatively continue funding and finding a little extra for the arts. And at the state level, it was perfect, because our legislature was coming in session in that January. And one of the representatives, when she was testifying to the group the importance of funding the arts, she showed the front page of the Dallas Morning News and said, this cannot happen throughout this state. We have to fund the arts. And so what we didn't realise was going to galvanise this kind of momentum, that the arts and culture are important to the fabric of the economy throughout, throughout really globally. And that was the silver lining, to tell you the truth that this group continued to do. Even when our governor had said first that the museums could open, our museums decided collectively that they needed to one, make sure that their staff was onboarded and trained, make sure that their staff, their employees, their artists, and their audiences were going to feel safe. And so they opened later than the governor had allowed them to open.

But what they did is they opened within either the same weekend or within two weeks of one another. And they put out a collective media release and really collectively is what we feel has been the strongest aspect of this group moving forward together. And when I say 92 organisations that signed on with taking this survey, it really brought to reality how important it is that we advocate for each other, that this is a multimillion dollar economic impact to the city of Dallas. And without these arts organisations, we're not going to be a part of that recovery plan.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, it's kind of amazing to think of the arc of that in those early days, the importance of coming together for support and for sharing and navigating just so many uncertain aspects of our lives, right? And as it evolves into this shared approach to operational challenges, taking on that collective research agenda, and then thinking about advocacy and the potential for collective action.



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Stephanie Fortunato: In so many ways, those are such practical applications of coalition building and really, the strategy of distributing the responsibility of responding to that crisis, but also in demonstrating the potential for arts and cultural leaders to really engage communities in the wider concerns.

It's really quite extraordinary to, to think about how this all unfolded. I'm getting sort of chills thinking about, you know, what you're saying in terms of bringing people together in this way.

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Well, the camaraderie was really important. We jokingly called it our weekly therapy session.

Stephanie Fortunato: (laughs)

Lily Cabatu Weiss: Uh, we shared, obviously, we shared challenges, but we shared laughter as well. And-

Stephanie Fortunato: Which is so important!

Lily Cabatu Weiss: It's so important, and encouragement and ideas and I don't think we'll go back from this. I think this is the silver lining. As many of us have realised what we've learned so much from this crisis is that, it's important. It's the only way of communication. And in and of itself, it was important for us to gather, to tell the city of Dallas that the arts are back, that we're back in person.

They're also doing virtual performances as well, but that we are back and this group with 29 other organisations worked together to launch a campaign called We Are Dallas Arts, and we did it in three weeks from start to finish and bilingual as well. And what we proved to ourselves is this brain trust, can come together, say it's important, and then start moving. We're not sitting there researching the statistics on, is it going to be a positive outcome or is it not? What we all agreed is that this is important for us to communicate to the city of Dallas, that we are – not Dallas Arts District, not Fair Park, not a particular neighbourhood, but we are Dallas arts.

And what was so great about that is organisations from all over our city said, yes, I'm going to buy into this. I don't even have to be in this video. In fact, I'm not going to send you any collateral because I believe in this programme because it's about the city of Dallas. And it was important to us. And it was important as a community to come out at the state level as well, that every city could do this. And it was really a no brainer. It was led truly by, um, one of the marketing teams at the AT&T Performing Arts Center and a task force worked immediately.

And as soon as we did the first draft of We Are Dallas Arts in English, on a meeting, there was in the chat that says, are we going to do a bilingual one? And I thought, Oh, the answer has to be yes to this. So one of the other CEO said, I have a cousin who translates in San Antonio, send me the script. And within an hour, it was transcribed.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: And we said the voiceover has to be a Dallas artist. And so, and that's exactly what we did. And that's what I love too. This wasn't about getting some named person to do, you know, notoriety, to bring this kind of notoriety. It was grassroots. You are important to us. We need you to come see us.

And I'll tell you those kinds of conversations are what inspired and motivated me to continue on because you know, it is amazing that these 29 organisations have come together and we're getting ready to launch the second version of this We Are Dallas Arts campaign. And this was pretty quick and the city helped us. They helped me get a lot of video footage and images of our, his- some of our historic buildings, and what's exciting about seeing that 15 second, 30 second and minute long reel is, it gives us the strength to continue building on this idea that we are proud of the talent and the artistry and the cultural landscape in the city of Dallas.

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Stephanie Fortunato: It's such a transformational effort. And what is the focus of the next round of the We Are Dallas messaging?

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Well, this first round is We Are Back. This second round is going to be uh, More Evergreen. And in this idea of we still are using the collective force and we want to make sure that we're even more represented in the city of Dallas. And then in various neighbourhoods.

Um, to lead up to what Dallas celebrates and that's Dallas Arts Month in the month of April, and we want everyone to know how important it is and why people should choose Dallas to come visit. So we're working with Visit Dallas and their entire cultural tourism department to help make sure that Dallas is at the forefront for drawing meetings, for drawing conventions when it's ready. And we all know it's going to take a while, but as we recover together it's important that we work with the hotels, that we work with our city government, that we work with our visitor bureau. And more importantly, that we work with each other as arts and culture. And this cross-marketing, this whole idea, obviously every organisation is tagging every organisation has this reel up on their website. The coverage that we're all cross-marketing with, is important as well. And we'll just build on this. We'll continue to build. And the We Are Dallas Arts goes to basically the calendar of events of arts and culture in the city of Dallas.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I think that kind of collaboration is so inspiring and you're right. It is replicable for other communities to think about how to come together and to support one another right now, but beyond this moment as well. You know, earlier you mentioned the Omicron outbreak, and I'm just kind of curious to know a little bit about, you know, how your institutions are weathering the recent disruptions.

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: I will say that in December uh, when I did a, an informal survey of our collective group, one because our visitors bureau wanted to know did the audiences increase in the month of December. That answer was wholeheartedly yes.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Even if an organisation had decided they're going to drop down to a 60% capacity, they were selling out at the 60% capacity. So that was great news.

However, in January, as we all came back, I think everyone was noticing a little bit of a dip about 20% and some 30%. And what was interesting is they were definitely finding a 20% dip in no-shows. From people who bought their tickets, but they are in, you know, in no-shows. And so, audiences and patrons will make those choices themselves on whether they feel safe enough to come in. Some are having very good attendance. Others are dipping down and I will tell you what is hard are the ones that are part of a union. And when the union dictates rehearsals mask-wearing, the kind of protocols, everything about it, it's been really frustrating, but understandably so. So what is happening here is that cross-marketing goes into high gear and that we really try to help the community as much as we can in terms of getting the word out. And I will say this, our media in the city of Dallas has been fantastic at spreading the word. Whether it's spreading the word of our challenges – obviously that's not something we're super proud of, \$96 million in revenue lost, but the fact that they covered it allows our residents to understand how deeply hit all aspects of our society is. And arts and culture included.

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Stephanie Fortunato: I wish you the best of luck with all of those plans that are in the works. I hope that those April events can take place as you've all imagined them. In fact, I think I should look at maybe some plane tickets and see if I can get to that block party in April. It sounds fun!

Lily Cabatu Weiss: You are always welcomed and you tell me, and we will house you, Stephanie. And honestly, we would love to have you here.

Stephanie Fortunato: Uh, no, no. I've got to support your hotels too. I know how that's an, also an important part of the mix there.

Lily Cabatu Weiss: I love it. I know it's so true.

Stephanie Fortunato: Ah you know, I think you've done such a great job of taking us through this moment, the challenges, the opportunities as you look ahead, what do you see? What are you thinking about next?

[00:35:26]

Lily Cabatu Weiss: Well, I can say hand in hand with all of this during all of our virtual meetings, et cetera, Dallas Arts District, as many of the cultural districts as a priority, urban planning and urban improvements is important to us. And certainly from 1983, when we called it The Sasaki plan, that really was the mixed use ordinance and guidance urban plan for the district, but that was in 1983 and we knew it needed to be updated. And so in 2021, where our final meetings, actually all of 2020, and then 2021, the council voted to accept what we are now calling the Connect Master Plan, which really deals with the public realm and really about urbanism and connectivity and how important it is for us to be multi-modal for it to be safe for the pedestrians, for it to be safe for automobiles, for scooters, for cyclists, et cetera.



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Lily Cabatu Weiss: So we are in line and aligned with the downtown Dallas Inc.'s 360 Plan. And as we move forward, we have two projects already underway with city of Dallas. So it's important at the same time that we support all of our programming, that we make sure that these neighbourhoods stays safe and vibrant and active and welcomes our community. So that, that is one of the things that we're doing, uh, on top of work, looking at with the city of Dallas, a revision of our signage ordinance as well.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Well, community and culture and great urbanism are certainly present in the Dallas Arts District. Lily, it has been such a pleasure to speak with you today. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, perspectives, observations with all of us here at The Three Bells podcast.

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Lily Cabatu Weiss: Well, Stephanie, thank you and the Global Cultural Districts Network. I'd love this whole idea. I listened to it. We all need to share best practices and stories and keep ourselves so inspired and motivated. It's important.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, that's what it is. Well, I'll keep an eye on the connect plans and everything else that is going on with We Are Dallas, the Dallas Arts District and we'll talk soon. Thanks Lily.

Lily Cabatu Weiss: Thank you, Stephanie.

Stephanie Fortunato: Listeners, if you want more check out www.thethreebells.net to find external references and other resources linked to this episode and to Lily's work. But first, stick around for a conversation between myself and Criena Gehrke, as we explore the key takeaways and actionable ideas from this conversation.

[00:38:11]

MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:38:23]

Stephanie Fortunato: Hi Criena. It's so good to talk to you.

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Criena Gehrke: Hey, Stephanie. Nice to speak to you too.

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Stephanie Fortunato: Again, we're probably meeting in very different weather patterns. It's about just to below freezing here in Providence, Rhode Island. Just give me the commercial for the Gold Coast.

Criena Gehrke: (laughs) It's Thursday morning, 8:00 AM here at the Gold Coast. It's sunny blue skies, 30 degrees and our plan to go to the beach this afternoon.



[00:38:48]

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, yes. That definitely is the weather. Yeah.

Criena Gehrke: There we go.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah.

Criena Gehrke: It has been raining for the last seven weeks, so I hate to disappoint you, but there's something about these times zones that just brings on the great weather.

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, well, I can't wait to hear about your beach day. Sounds fun. (laughs) What are you thinking about having heard what's happening in Dallas?

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Criena Gehrke: So there were a couple of things, Stephanie, one was that when we were looking at the HOTA development, we actually did look at Dallas Arts District because I think that there's some really fantastic vision and goals that they've set for themselves in that whole notion of a critical mass of institutions that mixed-use, how they were looking at the public realm was really interesting to us. So I was delighted to hear that you are having a conversation with Lily, but I think if we move away from master planning and visions for cultural precincts, the way that they responded as a district to COVID, I was left thinking, why didn't we take action? Like their action was so clear and I've really been doing a lot of reflecting going, well, what happened there? You know, why couldn't we achieve what they achieved? Because it was phenomenal.

[00:40:08]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, you know, you're right. I feel like, you know, there were moments during the pandemic in which our community did come together and, and there was a lot of value in that, but it was a little bit inconsistent and there was no action that came out of those organisations in some way. What, what did you guys do?

Were you bringing together the institutions and around HOTA?

[00:40:29]

Criena Gehrke: We have a series of what we call peak bodies, which are advocacy bodies. And we worked a lot as a collective right across Queensland in particular through Stage Queensland, which is that advocacy body to look at what each other was doing in response to COVID operationally, but also to support some of that advocacy for government.

And that was successful to a certain extent, but I still think it's not quite the same as having the institutions come together. And also the presenting and producing companies come together as a collective to really take action that is PR and community based. So putting it out there saying this is how we've been impacted, but also to advocate for a higher level of COVID recovery or relief or support.

I loved the fact, you know, when, when Lily was talking about the reopening that weekend and the fact that the government said you can reopen, but they all stopped together-



[00:41:40]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes.

Criena Gehrke: To make sure that they were on the same page in terms of that experience for the community, but also to support their teams and artists to be safe in that environment.

Like there was, it was a magnificent joined up approach. And so, why didn't we do that? I'm curious about why we didn't do that and the best that I've got at the moment, because all I can do is self-reflect about HOTA, is in my day-to-day running of the precinct, I probably need to spend more time thinking and acting on this collective critical massive advocacy and support. Does that make sense?

[00:42:27]

Stephanie Fortunato: Totally. I mean, it is hard to make time for that, but it is so important I feel like to really be deliberate, about bringing people together, not just in crisis moments, but sort of in the ongoing day-to-day work of all of our organisations and it was hard to do right? Especially when there was so much uncertainty with your own operations, I imagine. I know that's how it felt for me at the city of Providence.

[00:42:51]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. So how do you make time for that? And I think that one of the things that Lily spoke to was the consistency of attendance at those forums. So it was an immediate response where they were meeting every Friday and continually checking in on each other. But I think that the thing that was so successful and I keep reflecting on this as well, is it was obvious that at the end of those meetings, there was a verb, you know, like how many times do we all meet as a collective and you go, but there was no verb in that, like a verb is action.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah, group therapy instead.

Criena Gehrke: And so they obvious- yeah, that's right. Or it's group therapy, but also information sharing about how individually institutions are coping and, you know, we at HOTA, I think did lead the way many times, you know, we were the first to reopen when we could post-COVID, we created crop circles on the outdoor stage so audiences were sitting in bubbles. We had our state ballet company performing on a stage that was like six meters by six meters downstairs, cabaret style. So we did a lot of things.

We had this fantastic COVID-safe plan that we shared as much and as widely as we could. So we did a lot of stuff that I think was around supporting other institutions, but that's not the same as the collective action.

[00:44:28]

Stephanie Fortunato: I mean, I think one of the things that I took away from the conversation with Lily was the way in which they took control of the messaging. So not only were they coming together and you're right, there was action that was coming out of those weekly convenings, but they really decided how the story was going to be shared with the public.



[00:44:48]

Stephanie Fortunato: And the media was really their allies in that effort. And I think that is a really important element when anyone is trying to build a coalition around any part of the arts and cultural development for communities, but also wider social change.

[00:45:05]

Criena Gehrke: What I really loved about that coalition was also the work that they did around the collective good. And I was thinking, what would it look like for me if I came out boldly and said, well, HOTA has bombed out to the tune of \$5 million revenue, you know, but the fact that they'd done that collective survey, that there were 92 respondents signing up for that, that they were almost not proud, but they were loud and clear about the impact you know, \$95 million revenue lost, a thousand jobs lost, I think is what Lily was saying. And that's strong messaging, because it's not just one institution standing up and saying I'm in trouble. I've got this issue.

It was the collective saying that, and it really resonated for me because we're experiencing, as is every arts and cultural district institutions sector across the globe, exactly the same issues, you know, and the way that they then translated that into, as a collective, advocating to government for increased support across the board. And then this whole notion of a campaign, a PR campaign, We Are Dallas, that then starts to message out to their community, but also is an open invitation to come back to the Dallas Arts District. Like it felt like it was organic, that it evolved, that it was vital and strategic all at the same time. And you know, isn't that the perfect storm you try to create?

[00:46:49]

Stephanie Fortunato: Yeah. I was really struck by the way in which they took control of the messaging. And not only did they take control of it, but you're right, they shared the opportunities for others to tell their story.

And it was in that hole that you could feel like we are stronger together in a really authentic way. I feel like, you know, why didn't we do that is a great prompt for you and I, but in some ways we are all trying to do so many things at once that it is really hard to be intentional about keeping the momentum going in a way that matters to keep inviting people back to the table and keep the conversation evolving in a, in a more natural and responsive way to changing conditions. I really appreciated when she spoke about the differences between December and January. December, in which there's so many people coming out. And then with the Omicron outbreak, sort of needing to recalibrate a bit and how that was reflected by the coalition in messaging that did invite people to come back and in safe ways, new ways.

[00:47:58]

Criena Gehrke: Yeah. And on a really base level, I also appreciated her audience trends because they mirror ours. (laughs)

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes. I was seeing the same thing here. (laughs)

Criena Gehrke: Yeah, that's right. And so there is comfort as um, listeners enjoy this podcast. It's okay to go, Oh, okay. I'm not alone. You know, why didn't we take action?



[00:48:18]

Criena Gehrke: Perhaps we could have taken different action. We're all having different experiences, but we're all the same as well. And there is comfort in that actually.

[00:48:28]

Stephanie Fortunato: And you know what? We still have time, our recovery and the resiliency that can come from our communities coming together. We know what to do. And so I think we need to commit going forward to finding ways to bring people together, to collaborate and to figure out how to align resources so that there is a common goal at the end, and that we can all thrive in all of our individual community.

[00:48:53]

Criena Gehrke: I think that's right. So why didn't we do that? I think that there's many reasons, and I thank you and really for the conversation, because it has made me reflect, what am I going to do next? I'm going to free up time in my world as a CEO to spend more time, both thinking about these things, but also collaborating, finding ways that we come together so that we've got a collective voice as a sector.

[00:49:21]

Stephanie Fortunato: Oh Criena, well, I hope that we'll stay in conversation some of the learnings and I'll commit to do the same here. Thank you so much for helping me to think through this conversation. As always, it's been a pleasure to speak with you.

Criena Gehrke: You too, Stephanie, and a huge thank you to Lily, because it really was a thought provoking chat.

Stephanie Fortunato: Yes. Thank you so much, Criena. Thank you, Lily. And thank you listeners for tuning into this episode of The Three Bells podcast.

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[00:50:12]

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